DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 850 IR 054 456

AUTHOR Overduin, Pierre G. J.
TITLE The Role of Children's Books in a Multi-Cultural Society.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship (21st, Belfast, Northern Ireland, July 20-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Afrikaans; Apartheid; Black Culture; *Childhood Attitudes; *Childrens Literature; *Cultural Pluralism; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; Publishing Industry; Racial Bias
IDENTIFIERS Historical Background; *South Africa

ABSTRACT

It has been accepted that reading has a pertinent influence on the reader, especially the young reader. In a multi-cultural society, a child learns about himself and the different people around him from books. In this way, the child learns to know and appreciate his own culture and that of other children, and a healthy understanding between children near and far can be established; this should also be the case in South Africa. Until the 1970's most children's books in the Afrikaans language have depicted the social order of the time, in which blacks played a subordinate role. Since then, change has gradually taken place, and books have been published in which black and white children live, play, and appreciate each other in a normal way. A positive multi-cultural attitude in children's literature can contribute, especially in South Africa, to a social change if it corresponds with other reforms toward a more humane and just society. This paper presents a brief history of the founding of South Africa, followed by a description of the many cultures and a list of the twelve indigenous languages. The development of Afrikaans children's books is traced; and problems of current Afrikaans book publishing are detailed, including the limited number of readers, high price per copy, and limited expensive color illustrations. (ALF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
P.G.J. Overduin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED358850

21st Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship

THE ROLE OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SOCIETY

Prof.dr. Pierre G.J. Overduin
Head, Department of Library and Information Science
Director : Information Centre for Children's and Youth Literature and Media at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

1. The influence of reading on the child

In a paper published by the National Institute of Education, Betsy Mynhier, Reading Consultant with the Kentucky Department of Education, stated the following:

"In spite of the competition from the mass media of today, reading continues to increase in importance in the American way of life. As our society continues to grow in technological discovery, more and more types of reading are required. The role of the reading teacher is magnified as he guides boys and girls in applying techniques of critical evaluation of reading to what is seen and heard on radio and television and what is read from the vast amount of printed books, magazines, and newspapers.

The printed page is many things to many people. Reading a book can be a visit to the moon, a means of discovery and awakening, or a euphoria for unleashed emotions and interests. Reading is essential to the existence of our complex system of social arrangement. It is the means by which the past can be relived, arguments and beliefs can be expressed, forms of government can

IR054456

be understood, and generations can be linked to the history of mankind. Truly, reading is the bond that brings people and places together" (4 :12).

Educators and librarians have for a long time stressed the power of the written word. As far back as the classic period Aristotle strongly advocated literary instruction. The influence of reading increased during the Middle Ages and was further extended by the Reformation's emphasis on the printed book, mainly as a propaganda device against the Roman Church. During the last five hundred years the use of print has gradually transformed Western civilization into what Spengler called a 'Buch-und-lesen Kultur'. One cannot over estimate the influence of certain books on society. This point of view can be illustrated clearly by referring to some of them at random:

The Bible - the book that has had a decisive influence on our Western civilization

Machiavelli's Il Principe that laid the foundation for absolutism in government

The works by Voltaire, J.J. Rousseau and other contemporaries that prepared society for the French Revolution

Kant, Karl Marx and Sartre who through their philosophic works have influenced modern thinking

Books like Oliver Twist, (C.Dickens - Britain), Uncle Tom's Cabin (H.E. Beecher Stowe - America), Max Havelaar (Multatuli - Netherlands) and Cry the beloved country (A.Paton - South Africa) have opened many eyes to the situation of the poor and the oppressed.

Notwithstanding attitudes that minimize the influence of books on daily life, continuous exposure to advertisements, propaganda and ideological perspectives has a pertinent influence on individuals and the broader society. If this is applicable to a mature person it will especially be true in the case of children who are easily influenced by their surroundings. Difficult as it appears to be to establish precisely children's responses to the books they read, it is even more difficult to assess or measure the effects of the reading of fiction on their development. There is, however, remarkable concensus among educators that extensive reading of quality literature does indeed influence a child's developing social conscience. "Childhood is a time that is lived intensively. The child's reading is an intense activity which engrosses his whole attention :he becomes part of the action, lives the experiences of the characters as if they were his own. We as adults have lost that special capacity for concentration, the imagination and the sensitivity that make it possible. Usually we remain bystanders, while the child makes the entire book his own. Graham Greene said : "Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives" (5 : 33).

This influence holds true in general but especially in the field of multi-cultural societies. "Since literature is a product of culture and especially since children's and youth literature is a medium of enculturation or socialisation through which values are transmitted to the young, the probability exists that racial attitudes, whether negative or positive will be reflected in it. If negative racial attitudes can be found in any children's literature, then it follows that it is possible that it can negatively foster intra-ethnic values as well as interracial values (6 : (i), (ii)).

In an American study some years ago it was demonstrated that the reading and discussion of fiction, based upon the actual day-to-day existence of students, increased sensitivity to human values and brought about greater orientation to human relationships (1 : 147).

It is important that teachers and librarians should recognise the part they are playing in transmitting or abolishing racial prejudice in order to promote intercultural and interracial understanding since this is not only an educational matter but also a social one which has far-reaching socio-political repercussions. According to Madison (3 : 30) this calls for a comprehensive re-orientation, a totally reversed outlook which affects one's entire system of values. He believes that literature can develop attitudes which make for social tolerance because it cannot be separated from the morality of humanity and the ethical aspects of life which can stimulate racial understanding. An important criterion for analysis must

therefore be that of moral, spiritual and social value content including inter-cultural and inter-racial elements. In this respect he repeats that educators engaged in multi-racial education find that positive literary images concerning black provide identification, inspiration and self-confidence for black children, and promote understanding and appreciation for white children.

To summarize: It is an accepted fact that reading has a pertinent influence on the reader, especially the young reader. In a multi-cultural society books enable a child to learn i.a. about himself and about the different people around him. Children's literature is a medium of enrichment and socialisation through which values are transmitted to the young. In this way the child learns to comprehend and appreciate his own culture and also that of other people and thus a healthy and tolerant understanding between children, near and far, can be established.

2. The South African scene

After the Cape had been established as a refreshment station by the Dutch East India company in 1652 and later became colonised by the British, segregation between the white colonists and the black inhabitants gradually became a way of life until it was legalised by the South African Government in the 1940's and upheld thereafter. Also the education system became fully segregated following the establishment of different schools and education departments for the four major population groups in the country, viz.: Blacks, Coloureds, Indians and Whites. At present constitutional changes are taking place which hopefuly will bring about a new democratic, non-racial and just society.

South Africa is a country of many cultures and languages. Besides the two official languages, Afrikaans and English, a number of indigenous languages like Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho are spoken. According to the 1980 census the distribution of the total population according to home language is as follows:

Zulu	21%
Xhosa	18%
Afrikaans	16%
English	9%
North Sotho	9%
Tswana	8%
South Sotho	7%
Tsonga	4%
Ndebele	2%
Swazi	2%
Venda	2%
Rest	2%.

Out of the total population of 40 million - 6 million people speak Afrikaans as home language and nearly half of the total population can speak and understand Afrikaans.

The Afrikaans language has developed at the Cape from 17th century Dutch, especially from the language of the workers and seafarers and it became the communication medium between the colonists, the natives and the slaves. As there were few schools at the Cape this language of the unskilled developed into a new language which originally was only a spoken language but which gradually also influenced the more elitist Dutch, spoken and written by the Cape Government officials. This spoken language was obviously influenced by the local people and immigrants from other parts of Europe and the slaves from the East. At first this early form of Afrikaans had to struggle against the Dutch spoken by the upper class in Cape Town and surroundings. Later under the British occupation it had to battle against the all powerful English language. To a large extent the church played a major role in combatting the English threat. However Afrikaans was only recognised as an official language in 1925. This was part of the rise to power of the Afrikaans-speaking people in many fields of society, especially since 1948 when the (Afrikaners) Nationalist Party took over power in Parliament. As a result of the apartheid policy legalised by the National Party and the rejection of this policy by the black majority the Afrikaans language was gradually seen as the language of the oppressor. Consequently boycotts by school children against the compulsory learning of this language became a strong force against the Government. On the other hand Afrikaans remains today the home language of the majority of the so called Coloured people (3 million).

As a result of the present negotiation process between the government and other major parties in the country it seems as if the Afrikaans language is gradually being depoliticized. However the future of Afrikaans as an official language is at present uncertain.

3 Afrikaans children's books in a past and present South Africa

The first Afrikaans children's book, a Bible story, was written by C.P. Hoogenhout and published in 1873. Hoogenhout was a driving force behind the first Afrikaans Language Movement. His aim was the recognition of Afrikaans as a written and spoken language instead of Dutch, mainly for religious reasons. The Second Afrikaans Language Movement originated after the Anglo Boer War (1902) when most of the Afrikaans people had lost their farms and means of living. It was realized that the one uniting factor was the Afrikaans language against the domination of the English language. Gradually some children's books were published and in 1925 Afrikaans became a recognised official language together with English. At that time approximately 25 Afrikaans children's books were available. Many of the stories were adapted from Dutch or German stories. These books were mostly published in the Netherlands and the illustration and production were not of a high quality. Until the Second World War no children's books in Afrikaans were comparable in quality to European children's books.

Only after the Second World War more attention was given to original local stories and the production and illustrations improved. In this respect the South African Library Association played an enormous part by creating the C.P. Hoogenhout Award for the best Afrikaans Children's book in 1960. At first this prestigious prize was awarded annually, since 1982 bi-annually. Initally it was either awarded to an author or an illustrator. After the creation of the Katrine Harries Award for children's book illustrations in 1973 (named after the famous South African illustrator from German origin), the C.P. Hoogenhout prize is only awarded to authors. These awards have improved children's books in Afrikaans tremendously so that the writing, graphic work and production are comparable to the best in the world.

For the publisher of Afrikaans books a major problem is the limited number of readers. Where publishers of English children's books can often publish 10 000 copies of a book, the average number of Afrikaans children's books is 2 500. Consequently the price per copy of this small number must be higher than the British or American book. This also has its consequences regarding expensive coloured illustrations. The result is that often the South African publisher has to rely on co-printing with overseas publishers to meet the needs for full-colour picture books, with the additional problem that either the text or the illustrations may be unfamiliar to the South African reader. The local illustrator must accept the

fact that he can work in colour only in exceptional cases and even then he will be limited to one or two colours.

By comparison it may interest you that only a few original children's books in English have been published in South Africa, mainly as a result of the abundance of titles available from the English speaking countries. In the 19th century books in the African languages appeared through the activities of the missionaries. Besides translations of the Bible in these indigenous languages some stories for children appeared. Only recently African children's books have been published mostly as local co-production with the Afrikaans and English texts.

The question may now be asked in which way the local situation in a multi-cultural society like South Africa, with its history of apartheid, has been portrayed in children's books, in the past and the present. The person who has made a thorough study of racism in Afrikaans children's books is dr. A.Tötemeyer, at present lecturer in library science at the University of Namibia. In a doctoral study at the University of Stellenbosch, completed in 1984, she established that the early stories and illustrations reflected the racial prejudices of the white community of that time, while contemporary books created a more positive image of the black person.

By means of slides some illustrations of older and more recent Afrikaans children's books will be shown to illustrate the healthy change from a negative portraying of blacks in the older books to illustrations that reflect a more humane and integrated society. At the end of the paper a brand new video made by the well-known Weston Woods Studios of a recent Afrikaans/English publication by the Stellenbosch author and illustrator Nicky Daly, Not so fast, Songololo will be shown. This video is a first ever for a South African children's book.

4. Summary

In a country where race and ethnicity have become the cornerstone of an ideology of human separation for many years resulting in the estrangement and alienation between the people of the country and especially the children, a literature which will bring the children together again and bridge the existing gap in order to promote inter-racial understanding, is imperative.

The message of this paper is that children's books can have a pertinent, positive influence on the life and behaviour of children in a multicultural society if this coincides with a healthy, humane social order. South Africa is taken as an example, but the implications stretch far beyond one specific country. It is hoped that children's books in South Africa will form a bridge between children of different cultures in a country that prepares itself for a new democratic, non-racial and just society.

In conclusion I want to convey the thoughts of a Dutch pedagogue. His ideas are commendable, especially concerning the promotion of the right literature in a multicultural society so that authors, illustrators, librarians and teachers can all try to build a better nation with good books.

> ***He who teaches somebody to read does good work***
> ***He who teaches somebody to appraise healthy literature above everything that provokes does even better work.***
> ***But he who strives to let the intent of the good book become the purport of somebody's life, does work of everlasting value.***

References

1. CHAMBERS, D.W. Children's literature in the curriculum. Chicago : Rand Mc Nally, 1971.

2. LE ROUX, J. de V. A short historical overview of Afrikaans children's literature. **In** Far far away: some illustrated children's books. Cape Town : South African National Gallery, 1986.

3. MADISON, J.P. Values and analysis in multi-cultural children's literature. **Multi-cultural children's literature**. 1(3), 1979.

4. MYNHIER, B. Parents are reading teachers too. Washington D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, 1981.

5. PIENAAR, L. Why only the best for children? **Artes Natales**. 1(2), Aug. 1982.

6. TÖTEMEYER, A. The racial element in Afrikaans children's and youth literature. Unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1984.

7. TÖTEMEYER, A. Towards interracial understanding through South African children's and youth literature. **In** Towards understanding : children's literature for South Africa. Cape Town : Maskew Miller Longman, 1988.